

# Calvin Speaks



Vol. 1 No. 1

@ 1980 Geneva Divinity School

July, 1980

## THE EXECUTION OF REBELLIOUS CHILDREN

### (Part 1)

An Introduction to Calvin's Sermons on Deuteronomy

John Calvin preached through Deuteronomy on weekdays from 20 March 1555 to 15 July 1556, totalling 200 sermons. These were taken down in shorthand as they were delivered by the indefatigable Dennis Raguenier. They were gathered by the pastors of Geneva, and published in French in 1567; and were translated into English by Arthur Gelding and published in 1583. They have not seen print in English since that time, and are extremely rare. It is the purpose of *Calvin Speaks* to make available these and other rare sermons by the great master, in modern English, in the hope and prayer that these will assist the continuing reformation of the churches.

The English language in 1583 differs considerably from our modern American idiom, and thus the sermons have been put into modern English by James B. Jordan. These are not new translations from the French, but only modernizations of Gelding's original translations. Anyone wishing

to check Gelding's original can obtain a copy of "The Sermons of John Calvin upon Deuteronomy" from University Microfilms International, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106, by ordering number 11469, STC No. 4442. Mr. Jordan paid \$98.00 for his paperback copy of the xerographic reprint, which is in very small type. The prices continually rise, and a hardcover edition costs more.

The introductions by Gelding and by the pastors of Geneva stressed that these sermons on Deuteronomy are especially valuable in showing how God's Law was relevant for the civilization that the Reformers were trying to build. With that in mind, the initial issues of *Calvin Speaks* will focus on Calvin's expositions of some of the more controversial portions of Deuteronomic law. Let us learn from this master in Israel how to preach and apply this portion of God's holy Word.

Sermon 123.31 December 1555. Deuteronomy 21:18-21.

18. If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and *that*, when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them;

19. Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place.

20. And they shall say unto the elders of his city, "This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice. *He is a glutton and a drunkard.*"

21. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die. So shall you put evil away from among you. And all Israel shall hear, and fear.

Here first of all is shown the charge and duty of those who have children. *Secondly*, it is shown that when children grow past correcting by their fathers and mothers, they must be rooted out, because their actions are against nature, and is such an infection as provokes God's wrath against the whole country.

#### *The Duties of Parents*

Now as touching the first point, it is said that a *man has a contrary and stubborn son, and that he has endeavored to reform him*. Here God presupposes that the father and mother are performing their duty, for their children are given them on condition that they must yield account of them. If a man has laid the bridle upon his child's neck, and let him play as a loose colt, then he deserves to have his eyes picked out by him, and all the evil that the child does is to be imputed to his father, because he was negligent in correcting him. Therefore, we see (as I have said before) that Moses here warns fathers and mothers to be diligent in nurturing their children. And if chastisement will not prevail, their children are to be taken for utterly unrecoverable.

Wherefore, that we may benefit ourselves by this text, let us mark well that he to whom God gives children must have a special care to bring them up well, for that is a singular treasure, which ought to be preferred before all the goods in the world. If a man be slothful and allow his children to run at random, is this not an unthankful rather than in his mouth—JBJ.

attitude that offends God grievously, seeing he despises the benefit and honor which He has vouchsafed upon him? Must it not be the case that men are stark blind when they prize some other thing in their houses more than their own children? Some take more care regarding their cattle, oxen, or horses than of their own children. Every man takes account of his wares, of his lands, and of his meadows, and meanwhile he leaves the chief thing alone.

Such men ought to be sent for schooling to a certain heathen man, who being in a house where all things were as finely furnished and dressed as could be devised, and finding the good man's son to be a rank slob and evil-natured, spat in his face saying, "I must spit on the filth that is left here." As for those who are so diligent and watchful about their merchandise, their revenues, their possessions, yea and their cattle (inasmuch as they take more care for their dogs and horses than for their children, as we accordingly see how great lords set more store by their hawks and hounds than by their children), do not such blind wretches betray their beastishness, that men may abhor them as folk wholly devoid of all sense and reason?

Yet notwithstanding our Lord here tells us that if men or women have children, they must look to the bringing up of them. True it is that chiefly it is the father's duty, but the mother also has authority in the matter. If a child is so brazen as to say, "My mother is a woman,"<sup>2</sup> he must go and find fault with God. For we see here how the authority is given to the one as well as to the other, so that God does not appoint the father alone to govern the child, but that the mother also should have part of the honor and pre-eminence, and that the child who will not obey his mother shall be taken for past grace and be condemned to death. Therefore, both parents ought to perform their endeavor to the utmost of their power. For seeing that God has honored the mother, it is good reason that she on her side should exert herself to do her duty.

And it is not enough for fathers and mothers not to give their children permission to do evil, or not to train them thereunto; but they must also nurture them and instruct them in goodness, as nature itself shows. If a father say, "As for me, I do not uphold my son in this evil; I dislike it, but I can do nothing about it;" this is a very feeble excuse and it is not fit to be admitted or to be taken into account. For it may be said unto him, "You are a blockhead. God has set you in your place, and He will have you to be the master of your child. You are but a dolt, in that you sit idly by when he sins." So then, let us learn that here God requires a carefulness in fathers and mothers, that they should take pains to teach their children, and have an eye to their behavior and dispositions, and that if there be any fault in them, they correct it, and be very diligent in that regard.

Now if mere negligence be so condemned, though fathers and mothers do not approve of their children's misdeeds, what will become of them when they bolster them in their evil-doings, and protect them as much as they can, and are offended when anyone else endeavors to bring them into the right way from their waywardness? And yet we see that parents do so.

Truly, negligence is too common a thing, for fathers and

mothers have no more regard for their children than to receive some service at their hands. Indeed, they are well able to find time to see to it that their children are taught what to do: to think concerning household business and dealings, or to occupy some trade that they might put their parents to no expense when they are come of age, but rather that they might reap some profit from them. For as the proverb says, there is no likelihood that those things will bring grist to the mill,<sup>3</sup> and therefore a father can find in his heart to wink at the vices of his child, as long as he sees no disadvantage ensuing from it.

This negligence is not unmixed with malice, however, for if someone else attempts to reform their children, they will oppose him and favor their children, maintaining them even against God; but our Lord pays them the wages that they deserve. We see how the greatest pinch pennies in a whole city or country, and the most niggardly and stingy, who would gnaw off their fingers' ends for a penny, or for a farthing with which they can whiten their teeth; these same have whoremongers for children, who are ever seeking to pick their fathers' pockets to pay for their harlots. The child, therefore, becomes a robber of his father, and yet the father is content to maintain him and will be angry if anybody should chastise him for it, spewing forth his poison like a devil, which in fact he is. Indeed, this is no new thing, for it is like this in all cases, and after this manner.

Now, when such things are to be seen, ought we not to behold God's vengeance also? You are a penny pincher; you are so given to covetousness that you pine upon the ground, because you will not eat one bit of bread but with grief; and yet in the interim you have a son who steals and filches from you to maintain his whoredom. Because you are a despiser of God and a wicked caitiff (i.e. coward-J. B.J.), and want your son to resemble you, so that your attempt to make him be like you results in the furtherance of his sin and wickedness; therefore, God recompenses you according to what you deserve. For you deserve to have your goods devoured and to be mocked at by the whole world, so that all men may behold your shame while you yourself never perceive it. Here we see God's manifest judgment.

Regardless of the case let us bear in mind this lesson, that if fathers and mothers are negligent they are as blameworthy before God as if they had given their children leave to do all manner of wickedness. But if they are offended at other men for correcting them and for endeavoring to bring them back into the right way, they show themselves to be utter devils, and God has given them up to a reprobate mind. Therefore, let every one of us for his own part take warning, to discharge ourselves in our duty.

And let such as have children take pains to teach them, but not for the reaping of any earthly profit by them. Of course, profit may well be an accessory to it, but it ought not to be the chief point. What must they have regard to, then? Since God has done them the honor of setting them in the estate of fathers, they must do their best to yield

<sup>2</sup>implying that as a woman, she can have no authority—J.B.J.

<sup>3</sup>What the proverb cited by Calvin means seems to be that spiritual training does not contribute to financial success. Bible lessons do not bring grain to the mill to be ground.

unto Him their children whom He has put into their hands, and to make true sacrifices of them unto Him, that there may always remain some good seed to honor Him. For we see that Scripture tells us often that God's name must flourish from generation to generation. And this is to the end that, having served Him all the days of our life, we should endeavor to the utmost of our power that there might remain a good offspring after our death, so that God's glory might not be quenched nor buried, but that His praise might endure forever. That (1 say) is the mark at which fathers and mothers ought to aim. Indeed, even those who have no children ought to have the same mind and desire, and to show it by their doings as much as they possibly can.

What should be the response of those who are blessed with children? He sees a mirror of God's grace in his house, and it is a blessing which the Scripture (Ps. 128) highly commends, so that he may say, "I have my young children about me, and God shows me as it were with His finger that He loves me and has a care for my house. He has here created for me children of my seed, after His own image, and they have been baptized in His name so that I might be the more moved to dedicate them to - Him and to frame them to the obeying of Him." If a man has such a teaching and such a mark to set his eyes upon, and yet is not provoked to do his duty, must it not needs be said that he is worse than a blockhead? So then, let this matter be well marked and let men bear it in mind that it may stir them up to do the thing that is told them here, namely to bring up their children faithfully, if they have any. And moreover, when they see any evil touch or vice in them, let them labor to reform it, so that the father and mother may protest that they have indeed done their duties.

#### *Stubbornness*

Express mention is made of stubbornness. For as regards particular faults, a father and a mother ought to endeavor continually to bring their children into the right way. True it is that God meant not to have faults other than stubbornness to go unpunished. When a child has in any way offended, having a father or mother alive, it is not meant that he should be exempted from punishment. Rather, he is under the correction of his father and mother.

But here God speaks of another case, which is that fathers and mothers should bring their children before the judge to have them put to death. Lo, here is a great extremity. We know well what a heartbreaking experience it is for a father to see his son punished by the law, even though it be by the hand of another. It is not possible, then, for a father to deliver his son to death until he has attempted all the remedies that can be, for otherwise it would be against kind. Therefore, not without cause is here made mention of such great pride and stubbornness that the father, having exerted himself and done what he can to the utmost to reclaim his child, perceives that it will not avail him to do any more, and therefore that he must be willing to deliver him into the judge's hand to be put to death.

And so we see that fathers and mothers must proceed in

chastising their children until they see them utterly past hope of amendment. And I add this, because sometimes parents are so out of patience when their children will not be reclaimed at the first attempt, that for spite they leave them alone, and so their children fall into all manner of excess. But they ought not to do so. What then? Until they find by experience that their child is out of measure stubborn, and shows himself to be of so contrary and indisposed a nature that he cannot be reclaimed, the father and the mother ought to proceed still with that nurturing of him which God commands here.

And parents ought to be patient in this case, for mildness is a virtue requisite in these affairs, because if a father trust to his own courage he will mar his children if he finds any difficulty in the teaching of them (forasmuch as it is always a painful thing, and yet God will have men to occupy themselves in nurturing their children, notwithstanding the painfulness thereof). And if they cannot frame their children according to their desire, so that the children bite down on the bridle in their teeth, truly it cannot but turn to the great grief of the parents. What do they say? "Ought not one word be enough to the child? Ought he not to be ashamed, if there were any ounce of honesty in him?" After such a manner might a father speak. But howsoever the world may go, yet must not the child be left at random, without regard for winning him to God. We must rather use patience, as St. Paul counsels us in speaking of corrections. Indeed, he tells us that we must use sharpness and rigour to move such as be too much hardened in their sin, but yet he would have it matched with meekness and patience (I Thess. 5:14).

Now then, what ought fathers to do? Should they be so out of patience as to give up the correction of their children? No. And therefore let us learn that in this text fathers for their part are warned to keep hold of themselves when they see their children given to lightness and mischief and misbehaving themselves; and that although they cannot win them at the first nor bring them to such meekness as to make them take the right way of their own good will, yet they must consider with themselves how it is God's will to keep them occupied in this kind of painstaking and to try their patience after this manner. Thus we see one other point which we have to mark in this text, where mention is made of such unreformable stoutness and stubbornness as fathers and mothers find to be past remedy by themselves, and therefore are ready to resort to the judge.

#### *The Charge of Incurability*

Now let us come to the evidence that is to be given by the father and the mother. It is said that *they shall come to the gate*, for that was the place of justice in olden times. So then, they are to repair to the seat of justice and there say, "*This our son is stubborn and rebellious against us. We have attempted to reform him and cannot prevail with him. He is a glutton and a drunkard, and therefore we now put him into your hands.*" God's will is that upon this evidence the child shall be stoned to death.

And it is not without cause that he gives such authority to fathers and mothers. For it is not likely that men will be

so cruel as to spill their own blood, for that would be utterly against nature. Therefore it is with good reason that the father and mother should be believed without further investigation or sifting of the matter, seeing the case concerns their own children. For it would shame the father and mother to drive them to bring witnesses against their own children, and to require the ordinary manner of indictment would be a derogation of the estate wherein God has placed them.<sup>4</sup> And seeing that such a prerogative is given to men, they ought to have the more regard for their duty, But God's will is that the father and the mother should be believed. And why? Because He has printed and engraved such an affection naturally in their hearts toward their children, that they would rather die than to do them wrong.

Now if a man be so wicked and beastly as to charge anything falsely against his own child, and to show himself devoid of that lovingkindness which our Lord has imprinted in mankind, and of which some elements are to be seen even in the brute beasts; what a thing it is, that a man should so far overreach himself!

And therefore, parents see here what honor God does them in making them to be believed against their children, which truth ought to make them more conscientious in loving them and in bringing them up with all gentleness, and even in their chastising of them to use the rule that St. Paul gives us, which is that parents should not provoke their children to wrath by too much rigor (Eph. 6:4). For it sometimes comes to pass that a child is put out of heart because he sees his father use no mildness towards him, nor any reason or love in his dealings. Therefore must discretion be used in this case.

And to be short, let us note that the more honor God does us, the more are we bound to do our duties. As for example, those who are advanced to any degree of estate or honor ought to consider that God has bound them exceedingly, and that they ought to exert themselves the more to do their duty; and this belongs generally to all estates. But it is said here expressly concerning fathers and mothers. And therefore such as have children must look to it that they love them after such a manner, that they keep themselves from abusing the power and authority which they have from God; for God did not entrust them with power that they might abuse it.

It is also declared further here that the father and the mother may not accuse their children judicially unless they find them unreformable. I have told you already that this place speaks of punishment by death. For if fathers and mothers put their children to death before they have undertaken to take pains with them to see them well instructed, ought they not be coupled with them, as causers of their destruction?

A father perhaps will say, "I have not consented to my son's evil actions; I have left him alone." Indeed, but should you have fallen asleep when God has appointed you to keep

watch? You should have guided your child so that he would not have stepped one pace without your being at hand to direct him. You would have guided a brute beast, and have you made no reckoning of your own seed? You leave the creature alone which is formed after the image of God, even though you have been appointed his keeper, and you think to escape by so trifling an excuse?

Then if fathers and mothers come to this place of declaring their children to be stubborn and unreformable, if they cannot first protest that they have done their duties in chastising them, they themselves also shall be taken for guilty, forasmuch as it is apparent that it was because of them that their children did evil, because they allowed them to run at random. So that if a man is to be punished by law, it may well be inquired how he was brought up, and what teaching he had in his father's house; and when the mischief proceeds from that spring, the father ought no more to escape Scot-free than the son. Thus we see what we have to bear in mind. *(To be concluded)*

<sup>4</sup>In his Commentary on this passage, Calvin admits that the purpose of bringing the matter to the judges was so that a trial might be held, and the son given opportunity to present his case. "An admirable means, however, of moderating the severity of the law is introduced, when God requires the case to be decided on the evidence of the father and mother; and commends that it should be publicly heard, so that none may be condemned at the will of private individuals. By the Roman law the power of life and death over his children was given to the father, because it was not probable that fathers would be carried away by such senseless inhumanity as to deal cruelly with their own bowels; but, since sometimes fathers are found who are not unlike wild beasts, and examples show us that many, blinded by hate or avarice, have not spared their own children, this concession of the Roman law is justly to be repudiated. I allow, indeed, that those who desired to inflict punishment on their children called their friends into council; but, whereas, the walls of a private dwelling conceal many disgraceful things, God imposed a much better restraint on parents when He did not suffer them to go further then to lay the information and to give their testimony. For, although He would have credit given to their testimony, still, when the children were brought to the tribunal of the judges, a legal trial undoubtedly ensued; and this form of proceeding is prescribed, viz., that the father and mother should bring their son and make their complaint before the judges of his incorrigible stubbornness. It is true that the sentence is immediately subjoined; yet we must infer, nevertheless, that the judges pronounced it before the criminal was stoned, else it would have been ridiculous that they should sit there like cyphers. The very mention of a trial, therefore, implies that the son was heard in his defence, so as to clear himself of the crime, if he was not guilty of it: for, suppose the moroseness of the father and mother were notorious; or that the father accused the son by the instigation of a stepmother; or that any unworthy spite were discovered; or that the father and mother had conspired to destroy their son in a fit of passion: the defence of the cause is, therefore, implied in the adverb than (at the beginning of verse 21, apparently-JBJ), for it would have been more than absurd that the son should be condemned without being heard." Charles Bingham, who translated the Commentary, adds this regarding Calvin's argument from the adverb than, "The particle v sometimes has this force, but is here translated in the Authorized Version and." Calvin's Commentaries are published by Baker Book House.